

Against the Grain

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The Peripatetic Browser-Bienville Books

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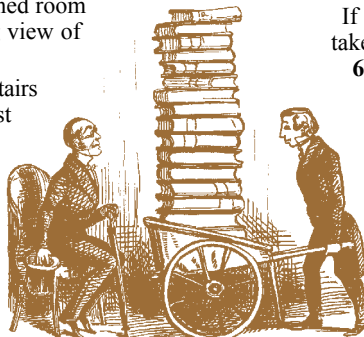
The Peripatetic Browser — Bienville Books

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Bienville Books, Mobile, Alabama
<http://www.bienvillebooks.com/Site/Home.html>

Located on boisterous Dauphin Street in downtown Mobile about a half-block east of the oak-shaded square from which it takes its name, **Bienville Books** is filled with volumes that may have once sat on the dusty shelves of moldering ante-bellum mansions. With two-and-a-half floors of titles to browse, many of them old and out-of-print, you can easily lose yourself for an hour or two. The first floor is clearly geared for the more casual browser. Here most of the modern thrillers and pot-boilers are displayed with a liberal mix of current high-brow literature. There is also an extensive collection of local and regional history and literature as well as a classics section where I noticed a nice if slightly worn **Scribner's** edition of *The Arabian Nights* with illustrations by **Maxfield Parrish**. A loosely curtained room in the back, for employees only, offers a tantalizing view of numerous items that have not been shelved.

Look in the glass case just before you head up the stairs at the back of the store and you can see a signed first edition of **Harper Lee's**, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and a signed edition of *Gone with the Wind*. There are also some first editions of works by **Hemingway** and **Faulkner** and, out of place amid the Americana, a small first edition of **H.G. Wells's** *The Time Machine*. Climb the narrow wooden stairs and you'll find a low-lighted room, containing an eclectic hodge-podge of popular and rare titles



from the past 70 years, with such wide-ranging authors as **Jean M. Auel** to **E. Phillips Oppenheim**. The spacious and well-lighted, full second floor contains a range of subjects from biography to science fiction. I was especially intrigued by a **Ralph Steadman** print hanging in the humor section. When I asked the sales clerk about it, she informed me that it had been salvaged from a volume of **Hunter S. Thompson's** *The Curse of Lono* that had been water-damaged in a hurricane. Welcome to book-collecting on the Gulf Coast!

Overall, I found the prices a bit high, particularly for the newer titles, although with the dearth of used bookstores in Mobile they will easily beat **Barnes and Noble**. Or you may stumble across some rare volume for which you have been searching. For myself, I walked out with a hardbound volume containing five novels starring **John D. McDonald's** best detective, Travis McGee. Perfect for relaxed summer reading in the Mobile heat!

If you happen to be in Mobile for a Sunday afternoon, take one of your purchases down Dauphin Street to **Café 615** (<http://www.cafe615mobile.com/>) and lazily turn the pages as you relax in the shaded courtyard with a brunch of eggs mauvila and a bloody mary or mimosa. There's always live music but if you are especially lucky you will be treated to the soulful southern sounds of **Lee Yankie**, the best rhythm and blues guitarist in Mobile and possibly in the entire southeast. Or if you can't make it to Mobile, check out his original album on iTunes, **Lee Yankie, The Leavin' Sound**. 🎸